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ABSTRACT

The Khmer are the predominant ethnic group of Cambodia, yet they have suffered genocide in their own homeland. The English language is the primary social barrier confronted by Cambodian refugees to the United States, since there are no similarities between English and Khmer alphabets and tenses. Refugees who arrrived in 1975 tended to be educated, to come from urban areas, and to possess some knowledge of Western culture. However, more recent arrivals are likely to be uneducated and from rural areas with no conception of American customs. Orphaned teenagers and children, along with widows, constitute a large portion of the Cambodian refugee population. All Cambodian refugees seem to possess some degree of survival guilt. Emotional problems range from depression, anxiety, and paranoia to sleep disturbances and death. Enlisting the help of a Khmer shaman (if available) will facilitate survival merit in the counseling experience. A crisis intervention model must be the basis of treatment strategies for social, emotional, personal, and career concerns of Khmer refugees. This includes having information about Khmer culture; emphasizing client strengths; providing opportunities for clients to discuss their perspective; describing treatment approach and rationale; focusing on concrete problems; and not violating traditional beliefs and values. (ABL)

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Cambodian Refugees

by

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RUNNING HEAD: Cambodian Refugees

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Abstract

A chronological study from 1945 through 1978 is presented to establish political, physical, and economic status of Cambodia. Values in terms of family obligations are related to Hinayana Buddhism as a means of survival from the genocide. Life for refugees in the United States facing barriers of language along with the pain of survivor guilt during readjustment is discussed. Six guidelines are suggested to be incorporated with the crisis intervention model for therapy.

Chronological History (1945 to 1978)

The relevant history of the Khmer, the predominant ethnic group of what was once Cambodia, goes back at least 2,000 years. The magnificence of Khmer civilization from the 8th to 12th Century is reflected in Cambodian homes today, displaying pictures of Angkor Wat and other massive temples (Sheehy, 1986). The Khmer continue to rely on their heritage for survival. These presented events, gleaned from the Encyclopedia Britannica (1989) establish reason, describing political, physical, and economic status of Cambodia.

During World War II Japan occupied Cambodia, but France, retaining nominal control, put Prince Norodom Sihanouk on the throne in 1945. After the war the French regained control by Allied agreement, ergo Cambodia became autonomous – at least in name. From 1945 to 1953, those who supported the crown and those who supported parliament continued to work for independence. Early in 1953 Sihanouk dissolved parliament, imposed martial law, and sought world support for Cambodian independence; however, France did not grant full autonomy. The 1954 Geneva Conference recognized Sihanouk's government as the only legitimate authority. Internal political division was ongoing, yet Sihanouk viewed nearby countries a larger threat. Thailand to the west and South Vietnam to the east, historical Cambodian rivals, were U.S. allies and Sihanouk distrusted U.S. intentions (Field Enterprises, 1966). In 1965 he decided to align Cambodia with China, North Vietnam, and the National Liberation Front in South Vietnam. North Vietnamese military were allowed to use Cambodian territory to store supplies.

Both political left and right were dissatisfied with Sihanouk's decisions and

internal policies. The left resented intolerance of their dissent and the urban right had economic interests threatened. In 1970 General Lon Nol deposed Sihanouk. The change brought more instability and Cambodia became a battleground. The U.S. supported Lon Nol and North Vietnam supported the leftist Khmer Rouge, so named by Sihanouk, who had fled to the countryside. When the U.S. bombing of Cambodia ended in 1973, the Khmer Rouge continued to fight Lon Nol's regime.

Cambodia's economy disintegrated as military forces clashed. Rubber production, the economic mainstay, ceased; few crops were planted. Urban upper and middle classes began to feel the sting; the poor struggled. In April 1975 Phnom Penh fell to the Khmer Rouge. Sihanouk returned as titlehead of the new government. When a new constitution took effect in January 1976, Cambodia was named Kampuchea and Sihanouk resigned (Encyclopedia Britannica, 1989; Sheehy, 1986). Bromley (1987) notes that most of the Khmer refugees in the U.S. prefer to be called Cambodians rather than Kampucheans, signifying their desire to be disassociated with either the Pol Pot regime or the later, pro-Vietnamese government of Heng Samrin.

The Khmer Rouge moved to consolidate their power with Sihanouk's departure. The suffering began in earnest (Bromley, 1987; Sheehy, 1986; Charny, 1985). Cambodia's royalist and neutralist forces, weakened from the overflow of the Vietnamese War during 1970 to 1975, were unable to resist the Khmer Rouge takeover under the leadership of Pol Pot in 1975, when urban populations were much larger than they had been five years before. More bombs were dropped on rural Cambodia than on the entire Pacific theater during World War II, forcing

people into cities. Pol Pot wanted to return the urban population to its prestate (i.e., 90% agricultural workers). He forced closing of hospitals and schools. Crowds left the cities at gunpoint. Sheehy (1986) relates the terror of soldiers tossing patients out hospital windows to die in the streets, looting, and burning businesses. Even those who wore eye glasses learned that corrected vision was "elitist", so they broke them, thus destroying evidence.

Everyone connected with the American supported government of Lon Nol (e.g., middle-class merchants, intellectuals, anti-communists) literally ran for their lives. Pol Pot's "army" of rural boys conducted mass executions with farm implements to conserve bullets, while disease and starvation ate through the countryside. Troops swept rural villages, killing thousands at a time. Remains were ploughed into mass graves or left to rot in the sun – carrion fouled fields, wells, and jungles (Sheehy, 1986).

Estimates of death range from two to four million from a population of some seven million (Charny, 1985; Sheehy, 1986). Hundreds of thousands of civilians fled to Thailand through the jungle. At the Thai border they met suspicious guards who often refused them entry. After months of moving, Cambodian refugees filled Thai refugee camps and their woeful pictures began to fill world newspapers in 1977. Most suffered multiple medical problems – malaria, pneumonia, dysentery, and extreme malnutrition. People died faster than corpses could be removed. Those who stayed in Cambodia fared little better. As farmers fled, agriculture halted and mass starvation threatened the entire remaining population. By 1978 wire services referred to Kampuchea as the "Auschwitz of Asia", an Asian holocaust of starvation

and mass extermination. The genocide reports as many as 11 of every 14 family members had been executed, starved, or tortured (Charny, 1985). This paper deals with the refugees who fled for their lives and literally landed in another world – the United States.

Values and Beliefs

Khmer values and beliefs, established centuries ago, continue to sustain a rich heritage. Cambodians are taught from early childhood to view their role within family and society in terms of relationships and obligations (Morrow, 1987; Sheehy, 1986). Each family member must cultivate a sense of moral obligation and primary loyalty to the family. Children learn to overcome personal concerns and desires, adhering to a strict family code of conduct. Behavior is controlled by appealing to one's sense of obligation to others to save "loss of face."

Morrow (1987) indicates the "pride and shame" principle as having tremendous impact on family members, both positively and negatively. On one hand, highly valued individual academic and/or occupational achievements promote family pride. But, on the other, negatively-valued behavior (e.g., disobedience, disrespect, shirking responsibilities) results in collective family shame (Morrow, 1987).

One Khmer explanation for illness or physical handicaps is that the individual's condition represents a punishment for sins or mortal transgressions committed by one's parents or ancestors (Morrow, 1987). Another cause is the assumption that the inflicted is possessed by demons, ghosts, or evil spirits (Tobin & Friedman, 1983). Still another belief held by Khmer deals with imbalance in mind-body relationships – the idea that general health is maintained when the forces of "Yin"

and "Yang" are in harmony and balance. If imbalance is present, illness results.

Morrow (1987) reported that Khmer rationale for pre and neonatal trauma includes an unbalanced diet, perhaps from drinking inadequate amounts of beef bone soup during pregnancy, eating veal or lamb (which is believed to cause epilepsy), or eating bananas or watermelon. Difficult labor and delivery are related to excessive iron intake, which causes hard bones in the fetus.

Life is presumed to be unalterable and unpredictable for most Cambodians, requiring a resignation to external conditions and events over which they have little or no control (Morrow, 1987; Sheehy, 1986; Tobin & Friedman, 1983). Accepting this fate, human suffering is part of the natural order. Maintaining inner strength, persevering without complaint, and emotional strength during any circumstance is considered an appropriate expression of dignity and is a direct reflection of Hinayana Buddhism.

According to Morrow (1987), some Cambodian values are:

- Philosophy of life geared toward spiritualism.
- Family, not the individual, is the basis of society.
- Live on day-to-day basis (due to recent wars).
- Parents are more respected than teachers. Children have little independence and must obey and respect their parents.
- Family relationship is very close and children (up to ten years old) often sleep with parents.
- When conversing, Cambodians should not look steadily at respected person's eyes.

- Family head or older person is always greeted first.
- Punctuality is important to city dwellers, not to rural people. Time is "elastic"; it can be contracted or stretched.
- Population is 96% Buddhism, 2% Christian, 2% Moslem.
- People are supposed to live in harmony with nature.
- Sons are more valued than daughters.
- Individuals talk around a subject before coming to the point.
- A smile can mean anything – happiness, sorrow, agreement, disagreement, understanding, confusion; the possibilities are endless.

Hinayana Buddhism, which actually means "small vehicle", is, according to Kramer (1960), the form of Buddhism integral to Khmer heritages. It has maintained the simple and austere rules of discipline left by Gautama (Buddha), including:

1. Self-control, humility, generosity, and mercy must be practiced to reach nirvana (perfect state).
2. Suffering is caused by desire. In order to find passionless peace, desire must be given up and the Noble Eightfold Path followed. The paths are right belief, action, livelihood, effort, thought, aspiration, speech, and meditation.
3. The love of one's enemies is the crowning jewel of a Buddhist's life.

Robb (1982) reveals that trusting convictions and drawing from heritage was the primary mandatory survival tactic for the Cambodian, who often did not know exactly who was fighting whom, but there was always war.

American Experiences

Confronted with past experiences of a number of losses, Cambodian refugees arrived in the United States after a period of hardship, emotional distress, and extreme anxiety about their future. Many had high expectations of a better life, only to discover the harsh realities of unemployment, inadequate housing, and a loss of status and self-esteem. Having to adjust to Western culture and a whole new way of life, refugees often experienced a sense of disillusionment, failure, and inadequacy as they tried to make their way through a strange society without support of their indigenous social systems and extended families.

> I'll try to give the story in your language. It's hard to express the way I feel in it, but I don't feel the pain so much when I talk about it in your language. My own words carry too much weight. But I always worry when I finish a part, did I say enough? Did I really connect by those words? You see, your language is set for your way of thinking. It's like a different current. The situation I want to explain is set for another current, and that current carries the strong feelings from a different way of thinking. So it's like plugging a lamp into the wrong current. The energy I put into it takes more than it gives out. And a lot of the time, I don't want to tell the details. How would people look at me? (Sheehy, 1986, pp. 56-57)

The primary barrier faced by Cambodians in the United States is language (Yao, 1987). Khmer, the national language of Cambodia, was derived from Sanskrit and has been in written form about 1400 years. Nothing in the language corresponds to English plurals, and verbs have no past or future tense; words are rearranged to designate a quantity of more than one or past or future, hence Cambodians

struggling with English speak almost exclusively in singular and present tense. Khmer is not simple – containing 66 consonants and 30 vowels (Sheehy, 1986). It is no wonder that the motivated Cambodian masters the skimpy 26 characters of English so rapidly. "Bilingual" is a trick word in American educational parlance. In urban areas with a large population of refugee students, those who are truly bilingual are in a regular program, and are not called bilingual. Students in a bilingual program are taught only in their mother tongue, Khmer. They are relatively isolated from other students (Robb, 1982).

Sheehy (1986) has determined four language stages through which one must pass to regain identity and flourish in a new culture.

1. The rote period. One simply repeats words and phrases and begins programming the brain. Words are arbitrary.
2. The silent period. The new language shuts down to avoid mistakes.
3. The reckless period. Sentences gush out and many words are backward, but communication has begun.
4. The revising period. Through inferencing, words are put into context.

The exact number of Cambodian refugees living in the United States is not shown from the 1980 census. However, Baron et al. (1983) estimated 60,000 for 1982. This low number makes a sense of community difficult. According to Yao (1987) and Morrow (1989), later arriving Cambodian refugees are likely to be from a rural background and illiterate. The Khmer educational system was nonexistent for six years. Long before skills to get a job are attained, welfare benefits that refugees can receive for no more than 18 months are terminated (Anzovin, 1985).

Cambodians who escaped in 1975 from cities were formally educated and had some knowledge of Western customs. For instance, they understood that Americans shake hands, so the formal Khmer gesture of pressing their palms together with hands near their foreheads while bowing is saved for use among themselves (Sheehy, 1986). There are countless stories of Cambodians who have risen from janitorial positions to jobs in accounting firms or electronic design companies after one year – during which time they mastered English. The less educated, unwesternized, later fleeing group had to learn that Americans do not nap after lunch, urban traffic jams are routine, and all homes have refrigerators. Sponsors had to show them what to do with sheets and blankets, which were unnecessary in tropical Cambodia.

The genocide in Cambodia has forced many to seek refuge in the United States alone, leaving living family members behind. Teenagers residing independently from relatives or official American sponsors are common, and is the source of severe loneliness, anxiety, desperation, pessimism, and low self-esteem (Yao, 1987). Khmer respect for authority figures, the need to save face, and desire to please parents (living or dead) and bring respect to the family is the inherent motivation for achievement in their new land (Lee & Rong, 1988).

For those families who escaped intact or partially intact, a great deal of change in the family structure has occurred. Pains of adjustment have been experienced by every member. More often than not, the extended family is gone, ergo the support system has disappeared or at least diminished. Even the family hierarchy is challenged to the role reversal of husband and wife or parents and children (Yao, 1987; Sheehy, 1986). The family unit is threatened with collapse and lacks power

and stability to sustain its members. Often, children no longer abide by Khmer social norms and conditions. They are less respectful to elders, and less loyal to the family unit. All able-bodied family members work outside the home and the earning power of teenagers has further downgraded parental status. Sometimes a father holds two jobs to support the family and financially help relatives in Thai refugee camps or Cambodia. After basic needs have been met, relaxation is seldom; they are constantly striving to improve their standard of living.

Family dislocations have created large numbers of single parent families headed by women. In the U.S. these single parents feel trapped. If they refuse to date, they limit their chances for remarriage. If they do date, members of their community are quick to judge – hence they fear becoming an outcast. Cambodian women seek careers to help their family, which conflicts with the traditional view that women should stay home tending to house and children (Lee & Rong, 1988).

For Cambodian refugees, most physical evidence of their culture is gone, but some of the ancient, gentle civilization has survived all the way to Boston, Massachusetts in the form of a traditional dance troupe. Classical Khmer ballet is a style of dance, music, and storytelling. The Royal Cambodian Classic Ballet performed throughout the world during the 20th Century. As a revered symbol of Khmer culture in Cambodia, Pol Pot singled out the musicians and dancers for elimination. A few survived by pretending to be rice field workers (Deans, 1983), but most were killed. The dance troupe, offering a precious sense of community, is all that remains of a 1200 year old Cambodian tradition (Sheehy, 1986; Robb, 1983).

A humorous, but appropriate, interjection deals with the extreme politeness of Khmer teenagers as compared to American teenagers. Sheehy (1986) related that her adopted refugee daughter, aged 12, had been heckled by boys while walking home from school. When asked how she handled it, she responded, "I tell them 'fuck you, sank you'" (p. 277).

Counseling Implications

Conflicts and readjustments are inherent in the decision to relocate in a country as remote from Cambodia as the United States. Genocide, still close to the refugees, has stirred America's compassion – so close, in fact, that some refugees tremble when they hear the roar of planes and helicopters and children fear to walk through forests, anticipating hidden communists (Yao, 1988). Some, according to Tobin and Friedman (1983), were strong enough to maintain emotional stability under conditions of great stress. Others were noticeably unstable or borderline even before becoming refugees. And still more functioned when life was predictable, but for at least six years life was not predictable.

Survival guilt (Tobin & Friedman, 1983; Baron et al., 1983; Robb, 1982; Sheehy, 1986) is the commonality of severe emotional problems among refugees. In addition to depression, anxiety, and paranoia generally associated with trauma neuroses, the survivors suffer from guilt and self-loathing. Victims have experienced their new-formed comfort, safety, and modest reparation payments as undeserved rewards; they felt that they had no right to exist, much less to live well, while so many others had died in their places. Baron et al. (1983) and Tobin and Friedman (1983) have established a connection between survival guilt and unexplained

nocturnal sudden death among Cambodians, Vietnamese, and Laotian male refugees resettled in the United States.

Traditional Cambodians have no concept of mental illness., Whatever symptoms cannot be ascribed to physical causes, are attributed to troubled spirits or ancestral ghosts trying to possess the suffer's mind. Either a monk or a Kru Khmer was summoned for exorcism. Cultural relativism requires acknowledgement and respect for differing beliefs. American counselors, who generally do not subscribe to Khmer-world spirit beliefs, have experienced success promoting survivor merits over survivor grief when the aid of a monk or a Kru Khmer has been engaged (Tobin & Friedman, 1983; Sheehy, 1986).

Bromley (1987) identified three sets of interrelated factors that can produce a state of crisis: a) a hazardous event, b) a vulnerable state, and c) an inability to respond to stress with adequate coping mechanisms. The three interrelated factors identify Cambodian refugees. The crisis intervention model must be the base of treatment strategies for social, emotional, personal, and career concerns of Khmer refugees.

These practical guidelines can be followed for group and individual interventions (Bromley, 1987; Morrow, 1987; Tsui & Sammons, 1988):

1. Have enough information about the Khmer culture to permit interaction respectful of the client's sense of propriety in interpersonal relationships. Openness, independence, and directness are not valued.
2. Emphasize the client's strengths and coping skills that are working. Deemphasize explanations that focus on individual or family pathology.

3. Provide opportunities for Khmer clients to discuss their unique perspective, coping styles, and values in the context of experiences. Allow the client to "talk around" the subject.
4. Carefully describe the treatment approach and its rationale. Cambodians perceive authority in the therapist and will rarely question decisions even when the types of services offered differ considerably from what the clients may be expecting.
5. Focus on resolving concrete problems, deemphasizing questions that solicit responses involving affect.
6. Successful treatment requires an overall approach that is acceptable to the client and does not violate traditional beliefs, values, and face saving.

Summary

The Khmer are the predominant ethnic group of Cambodia, yet they have suffered genocide in their own homeland. The magnificence of their heritage still flickers, however. A chronological history beginning with Sihanouk taking the throne in 1945 and ending with refugees flooding camps along the Thai border in 1978 was presented. Death estimates range from two to four million from a population of some seven million.

Cambodians are taught from early childhood to view their role in terms of relationships and obligations with the family as priority. The principles of "pride and shame" and "saving face" were discussed. Illness can be explained through the transgressions of an ancestor, an imbalance in the forces of Yin and Yang, and/or an imbalanced diet.

The main religion is Hinayana Buddhism, which adheres closely to the teachings of Gautama. Khmer believe they were born out of the Lord Buddha and that philosophy enabled survival during the tragedies suffered in Cambodia and provides strength for current struggles in the United States.

English language is the primary social barrier confronted by refugees to the United States, since there are no similarities occuring between English and Khmer alphabets and tense. American school systems use the term "bilingual" when referencing non-English speaking students. Sheehy's (1986) four-stage language development theory contributed insight into the problem.

Refugees who arrived in 1975 tended to be educated, from urban areas, and possessed some knowledge of Western culture. However, more recent arrivals are likely to be uneducated and from rural areas with no conception of American customs. Orphaned teenagers and children, along with widows, constitute a large portion of the Cambodian refugee population. Whatever the situation, family life was disrupted through varying degrees of devastation for a people who's emotional core is the family. The Royal Cambodian Classic Ballet has survived enough to offer a flickering sense of community in urban areas.

All Cambodian refugees seem to possess some degree of survival guilt. Emotional problems range from depression, anxiety, and paranoia to sleep disturbances and death. Enlisting the help of a Khmer shaman (if available) will facilitate survival merit in the counseling experience. The crisis intervention model integrated with guidelines presented in this paper formulate a practical counseling plan.

Cambodians speak of the United States in terms of salvation – a promise of hope. But if a casual acquaintance were to ask them about their homeland, some would shrug their shoulders, others would smile.

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